

ORIGINAL ASSIGNED

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Universal Body Language

Miroslav Medvid, a 22-year-old Soviet seaman, jumped into the Mississippi River twice. It was not enough to convince the Immigration and Naturalization Service that he wanted to defect and, as he is quoted at one point as saying, "live in an honest country."

Although his actions were eloquent, Medvid speaks no English, and he was unable to jump the language barrier into the freedom he may well have been seeking.

The INS is, by reputation, no ornament of the federal service and its reflex of turning back political refugees from El Salvador and other Latin American countries has, plainly, been fine-tuned to the point of farce. The INS took Medvid back to his ship. He tried again to communicate by jumping out of their boat, but they didn't tumble.

Too late, the State Department entered the picture, instituted proper procedures, filled out the forms and accepted Medvid's word that he wanted to go home. U.S. doctors noted a cut on his arm, which the ship's captain said was self-inflicted, but were satisfied with Medvid's declaration that he didn't know if he had tried to commit suicide.

The bureaucratic explanation was that he had not asked for "formal asylum." Of course, he didn't. Asylum in Russia means an insane asylum. It is a place where those who protest the Soviet regime are drugged and abused on the grounds that anyone unhappy with life in a socialist paradise is demented. We can only imagine the tortures he is enduring on board and the hell that awaits him in home port.

He might have been better off if he had simply told the State Department that he was homesick. A 19-year-old Soviet soldier in Afghanistan named Alexander Sukhanov took refuge in the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. He did not want to go to the United States, although he was promised asylum, presumably in terms that did not terrify him. He said he couldn't stand the war and wanted to be in Moscow.

He may survive. At least the Soviet ambassador announced that his wish would be granted and took him away. Although the Kremlin certainly does not want its soldiers applying for home leave through the U.S. Embassy, Sukhanov's crime was so much less than it could have been—he might have declared he wished to declaim on Soviet atrocities in Afghanistan—they may let him off.

Does Medvid's wretched experience mean that INS guards should be required to learn Russian? Probably not. But they ought to be told at least that certain types of body language are compelling. They should consider that a man who jumps into the water twice is not just interested in swimming and that U.S. policy is to welcome people seeking refuge from communism.

Nothing helps with a certain type of mentality, but perhaps at a minimum immigration officers who fish Soviets out of the water should be instructed to call someone up the line before returning them to their owners.

For Vitaly Yurchenko, none need fret. The most spectacularly defective defector, a KGB big-shot, will go home to a Moscow news conference and repeat the cock-and-bull story he told an astonished Washington Monday. Yurchenko has confused and humiliated the CIA. He may not get off scot-free: He not only must face the music with the home office but with his wife, who may not be amused by stories that his flight to tyranny was triggered by the collapse of an affair.

But he is wonderful propaganda for the Soviets. They will not quibble at his wild account of having been kidnaped and drugged by the CIA.

One thing he said struck a chord with rational people. "I'd like to tell you," he said, "during these three horrible months . . . I didn't have any chance to speak Russian."

The most sensible person who has surfaced in the confusion is Yelena Mitrokhina, a defector, who said on "Nightline" that she had volunteered to the CIA to talk to Yurchenko because she speaks his language and knew what he was going through. Defecting, she told us, is hard work—hard for the defector, hard for the host.

Why, the experts ask, did a mature man, who knew what he was doing when he defected, redefect the first chance he got? Maybe instead of pondering what prompted him to scuttle to the Soviet Embassy from a Georgetown dinner with his handler, we should be trying to figure out how to deal with defectors.

Posh safe-houses and debriefings are not the answer. If we are going to urge them to take their chances and jump, we should have some idea of how to deal with them—or at least communicate with them. Maybe the CIA could start by not calling the people it assigns to them "handlers"—as if the defectors were dogs—or snakes.